

WHAT IS PROPER TO EACH THING'S NATURE

Aristotle distinguishes two sorts of virtue, ethical and intellectual. He seems to speak of two different kinds of happy lives, one in keeping with ethical virtue and the other devoted to study. These lives are not as distinct as they seem, and as they may have seemed to Aristotle himself, because the two kinds of virtue are related. The excellence of a rational animal must be shown in thought and deed, and happiness cannot require the sacrifice of either to the other. The life that is proper to a man includes both thought and action.

A PUZZLE IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle announces: "Every craft and every line of inquiry, and likewise every action and decision, seems to seek some good."¹ The good pursued in the *Ethics*, he explains, will be happiness.² One might expect that at the end of a book devoted to seeking happiness, we would find a clear understanding of what a happy life is.

We do not.

Instead, we get what appear to be two distinct and conflicting visions. On the one hand, there is a life of study³; on the other hand, there is the life devoted to the ethical virtues. Aristotle favors the former over the latter, but he does not seem either clear or confident. Indeed, he even suggests that he may be, to put it mildly, wrong:

¹ EN 1094a1. These are the opening words of the *Ethics*.

In preparing this paper, I used the digital edition of Ross' translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* available from non-contradiction.com. Quotes from the *Ethics* in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are from Irwin's translation, the notes to which have been consulted on various points. See generally ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS (Terence Irwin trans., 2d ed. 1999) (EN); ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS (W.D. Ross trans.), http://non-contradiction.com/ac_works_b26.asp.

² EN 1097a35-b20.

³ Following Irwin, I use "study" for *theoria*.

These considerations, then, produce some confidence. But the truth in questions about action is judged from what we do and how we live, since these are what controls [the answers to such questions]. Hence we ought to examine what has been said by applying it to what we do and how we live; and if it harmonizes with what we do, we should accept it, but if it conflicts we should count it [mere] words.⁴

The first part of *EN* X.7 is devoted to the superiority of study. Aristotle says that “if happiness is activity in accord with virtue,”⁵ as of course he thinks it is,⁶ “it is reasonable for it to accord with the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing.”⁷ The best is understanding, and “its activity in accord with its proper virtue,” which as such is “complete happiness,” is study.⁸

Aristotle defends this position by claiming that study is supreme because “understanding is the supreme element in us, and the objects of understanding are the supreme objects of knowledge”⁹; by noting the possibility of extending study for longer durations than action; by citing the purity and firmness of the pleasures of philosophy; by arguing that study is self-sufficient, both in the sense of not requiring (though it benefits from) the involvement of others and in the sense of being sought for its own sake alone; and by arguing that the active virtues are tied to trouble, while study is not.¹⁰

But then Aristotle seems to retreat. “Such a life would be superior to the human level,”¹¹ he tells us—and he has set out to give us ethics for humans.¹² So he tells us to “go to all lengths to

⁴ *EN* 1179a19-24.

⁵ *EN* 1177a11.

⁶ *EN* 1098a17 (“And so the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one.”)

⁷ *EN* 1177a16.

⁸ *EN* 1177a18. Following Irwin, I use “understanding” for *nous*.

⁹ *EN* 1177b20-22.

¹⁰ *EN* 1177a19-b27.

¹¹ *EN* 1177b27-28.

¹² See *EN* 1141a30-b2 (arguing that wisdom cannot be political science because then there would have to be a different wisdom for each kind of being).

live in accord with our supreme element.”¹³ If this means to study as much as possible, and only study is complete happiness, he is making complete happiness not merely difficult, but impossible for a human being to attain, then asking us to settle for as much happiness as we can get. Yet back in Book I he told us happiness is “the best of the human goods”¹⁴—the *human* goods—and “will be widely shared.”¹⁵ That excludes any life superior to the human level. There must be happiness attainable by men.

Aristotle discusses this in the next chapter, saying that the life in accord with the ethical virtues “is [happiest] in a secondary way, because the activities in accord with this virtue are human.”¹⁶ He argues throughout this chapter that those activities are inferior to study and that the life of study is happiest, but he repeatedly indicates that human beings cannot have a pure life of study. The gods, he insists, do have such a life, because it would be “ridiculous” and “absurd” for them to carry out the actions that define the ethical virtues.¹⁷ But we, “insofar as [we are] human,” do engage in such acts, and do need the external goods required for them.¹⁸ We even need health and external goods for study itself,¹⁹ and these apparently require some attention.²⁰

Aristotle, I conclude, wants to say that the life in accord with study is best. Indeed, to the extent that it is better to be a god than even the happiest possible man, he does say that. But insofar as he is advising human beings on how to become good,²¹ he cannot tell us to live like the gods we are not. He thus settles for telling us to maximize study, recognizing that we will also act

¹³ EN 1177b35-78a1.

¹⁴ EN 1098b14.

¹⁵ EN 1098b18-19.

¹⁶ EN 1178a9-11 (brackets in Irwin).

¹⁷ EN 1178b9-24.

¹⁸ EN 1178b5-8.

¹⁹ EN 1178b34-79a3.

²⁰ See EN 1114a15-20 (on getting sick through incontinence); EN 1121a21 (on the cure of wastefulness by poverty).

²¹ See EN 1103b27-30 (“Our present discussion does not aim, as our others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us.”).

pursuant to the ethical virtues, and endorses the life focused on the ethical virtues as a second-best choice.

But in fact, *both* lives he is offering a human being are second-best choices: Either we focus on the ethical virtues fully, which is not as good as focusing on study fully, or we focus on study to the extent we can, falling short of complete dedication.

To be left forever unable to achieve the best life as a human being, while perhaps all that a Platonist might expect,²² is an unsatisfying outcome if we are committed to pursuing happiness and think it impossible to achieve that goal after death²³; perhaps this is why, in *EN* X.8, Aristotle expresses such doubt about his depiction of the best life.²⁴ I believe Aristotle has taken us just a step short of a better answer—of a vision of the best life that reflects the system he defines in the first nine and one-half books of the *Ethics*—and indeed that he has pointed the way right in *EN* X.7. At the end of this paper, I will attempt to take the step Aristotle suggests but does not himself take. But some other considerations should be before us first.

ETHICAL VIRTUE AND UNDERSTANDING

To see how the life in accord with ethical virtue is related to that in accord with intellectual virtue, we should first consider what faculties of soul ethical virtue itself involves.

²² *E.g. Phd.* 84e-85b (on the joy of being about to die).

²³ See *EN* 1100a14 (“[C]an someone really be happy during the time after he has died? Surely that is completely absurd, especially when we say happiness is an activity.”).

²⁴ *EN* 1179a19-23.

Ethical virtue, according to Aristotle, is a “state involving the correct reason,”²⁵ and the correct reason involved in ethical virtue is prudence.²⁶ But although Aristotle at one point describes prudence as opposite to understanding,²⁷ the two are quite closely related.²⁸

Aristotle says: “[W]e ascribe consideration, comprehension, prudence, and understanding to the same people, and say that these have consideration, and thereby understanding, and that they are prudent and comprehending. For all these capacities are about the last things, i.e., particulars.”²⁹ He distinguishes the role of understanding in “demonstrations,” where it is concerned with “the unchanging terms that are first” from its role in “[premises] about action,” where it is concerned with “the last term, the one that admits of being otherwise.”³⁰ The role, and no doubt the development, of understanding differs from one case to the other—but it is still understanding.

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle divides the soul into parts with and without reason, and he further divides the reasoning part into a part that deals with things the principles of which can and a part that deals with things the principles of which cannot be otherwise.³¹ Both parts that have reason, it appears, have understanding.³² Now, prudence is the virtue of one of these parts, as wisdom³³ is of

²⁵ EN 1144b27.

²⁶ EN 1144b28. Following Irwin, I use “prudence” for *phronesis*.

²⁷ EN 1142a27.

Irwin’s alternative translation, “Hence it *corresponds* to understanding” (italics mine), would present less of a problem.

²⁸ See Richard Sorabji, *Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue*, in *ESSAYS ON ARISTOTLE’S ETHICS* 201, 215 (Amélie Oksenberg Rorty ed., 1980).

²⁹ EN 1143a25-28.

³⁰ EN 1143b2-4 (brackets Irwin’s).

³¹ EN 1139a5-9.

³² Understanding about the things that can be otherwise, which include human action, is mentioned numerous times in the *Ethics*. The *Ethics* has little to say about things that cannot be otherwise, but the brief discussion of scientific knowledge in EN VI.3 cites the *Analytics*, which discusses the use of *nous* in the context of things that cannot be otherwise.

³³ Following Irwin, I use “wisdom” for *sophia*.

the other. Thus understanding is an activity of a part of the soul the virtue of which is prudence, and also an activity of a part of the soul the virtue of which is wisdom.

With these three terms—understanding, prudence and wisdom—at his disposal, one might expect Aristotle, if he wished to say that the happiest life was one based on wisdom, to the exclusion of prudence, to refer to a life in accord with “wisdom.”³⁴ But he uses the word “understanding”—and he gives an argument that strongly suggests that both kinds of understanding are meant:

Moreover, each person seems to be his understanding, if he is his controlling and better element. It would be absurd, then, if he were to choose not his own life, but something else's. For what is proper to each thing's nature is supremely best and most pleasant for it; and hence for a human being the life in accord with understanding will be supremely best and most pleasant, if understanding, more than anything else, is the human being. This life, then, will also be happiest.³⁵

This notion that each person is his understanding because he is his controlling element is familiar from an earlier passage in the *Ethics*: It is for precisely this reason that the true self-lover is not the one who gratifies his appetites, but the one who gratifies his reason³⁶ by striving to do virtuous actions.³⁷ As he points out when discussing self-love, a person is said to be or not be self-controlled according to whether his understanding is in control³⁸; obviously, an un-self-controlled

³⁴ Granted, he does refer to study (as Irwin translates *theoria*, which, as Irwin indicates, refers to being actively aware of something that one knows or has in sight, see Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 349) as the activity of the wise man as distinct from that of the just or otherwise virtuous person. *EN* 1177a28-35. But he also refers to it as the activity of understanding, *EN* 1177b20, and this includes the understanding proper to the wise person. Moreover, the activity of wisdom is study, whereas the principal actions in accord with the virtues of character are other than study. Nonetheless, one can contemplate ethics and ethical actions, and the argument quoted in the text at note 11, *infra*, strongly suggests that this should be included, as explained below.

³⁵ *EN* 1178a3-8.

³⁶ “Reason” (*logos*) is the term Aristotle uses most in the relevant passage, but “understanding” appears there too.

³⁷ *EN* 1168b25-69a23.

³⁸ *EN* 1168b35-69a1. “Self-controlled” and “un-self-controlled” are the terms used by Rowe for the Greek words *enkrates* and *akrates*, which Irwin renders “continent” and “incontinent.” As Irwin notes in his glossary, the root of the Greek terms is *kratein*, meaning “control” or “mastery.” Irwin, *supra* note 1, at 335.

person's understanding lacks control over his physical actions, not his practice of the purely mental activity of study. Not only study, but ethical action too is in accord with understanding.

HAPPINESS REQUIRES THE HARMONY

If complete happiness is to be attainable, or even theoretically compatible with being a human being, study and virtuous action must be compatible.

As Aristotle acknowledges, no one can spend his whole life in study. If we were gods, perhaps we could, but a human being who decided to do nothing but study would starve.³⁹

Elsewhere in the *Ethics*, Aristotle even suggests that a certain amount of sexual pleasure is necessary.⁴⁰ If this is so, it would be implausible to regard Aristotle as advocating that we actually adopt a life devoid of any activity except study, and indeed, Aristotle tells us that a person who studies will also engage in virtuous actions.⁴¹

"Happiness . . . is best, finest, and most pleasant."⁴² Virtuous actions are not painful,⁴³ to themselves or to the virtuous person—though they may be to the vicious.⁴⁴ Now, whatever impedes an activity detracts from its proper pleasure.⁴⁵ Thus, when a virtuous person goes wrong in the exercise of virtue, he feels pain.⁴⁶

If the activity in keeping with the best virtue is study, then the person who turns away from study in order to engage in ethical action is giving up a better action for a worse one and failing to practice the best virtue. He is diminishing his happiness and his pleasure. Indeed, if his virtue

³⁹ See EN 1178b35.

⁴⁰ EN 1147b25-27.

⁴¹ EN 1178b5-7.

⁴² EN 1099a25.

⁴³ EN 1120a28.

⁴⁴ EN 1120a30.

⁴⁵ See EN 1153b1-19.

⁴⁶ Aristotle says this in the case of generosity at EN 1121a2-3, and explains it by saying that "it is proper to virtue to feel pleasure and pain in the right things and in the right way." I take this to mean that it is right to be pained at one's own errors and failures to act virtuously.

urges him to study at all times, not studying at any given time will be vicious.⁴⁷ But if this is so, the same act will be virtuous and vicious: virtuous, insofar as it is an act of justice, courage or whichever ethical virtue is relevant; vicious, insofar as it is a failure to study.

Perhaps even worse, when a virtuous person is faced with a choice between studying and exercising, say, justice, he will have pleasure and pain on each side, since the virtuous act is pleasant to the virtuous person.⁴⁸ If he chooses justice, he will suffer from the failure to study; if he chooses study, he will suffer from the failure to do the just act.

But “no one would call a person just, for instance, if he did not enjoy doing just actions . . . and similarly for the other virtues.”⁴⁹ If we maintain that a person should choose one of the two lives, and if we do not say that he is enjoying his actions only with the reservation that he enjoys them insofar as they are virtuous and not insofar as they are vicious, our “virtuous” person finds himself failing to enjoy virtuous actions—and therefore, not being virtuous—and therefore, not being happy.

Another passage in the *Ethics* also tells us such a person would not be virtuous. In *EN IX.4*, Aristotle says, “the excellent person is of one mind with himself, and desires the same things in his whole soul,”⁵⁰ while base people “are at odds with themselves, and have an appetite for one thing

⁴⁷ “But if doing, and likewise not doing, fine or shameful actions is up to us, and if, as we saw, [doing or not doing them] is [what it is] to be a good or bad person, being decent or base is up to us.” *EN 1113b11-14*. Ross’ translation makes the point even more strongly:

For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and *vice versa*; so that, if to act, where this is noble, is in our power, not to act, which will be base, will also be in our power, and if not to act, where this is noble, is in our power, to act, which will be base, will also be in our power. Now if it is in our power to do noble or base acts, and likewise in our power not to do them, and this was what being good or bad meant, then it is in our power to be virtuous or vicious.

EN 1113b7-14 (Ross trans.). The key difference from Irwin here is that Ross translates Aristotle as saying that where action is noble, inaction is base, and vice-versa.

⁴⁸ E.g. *EN 1104b5-9*; *EN 1170a8-11*.

⁴⁹ *EN 1099a18-20*.

⁵⁰ *EN 1166a14-15*.

and a wish for another, as incontinent people do.”⁵¹ The man who tries to study as much as possible and must tear himself away in order to engage in ethical action is in conflict with himself; he has an appetite, or at least a desire, for study, yet he has some other motive which leads him to undertake an ethical action instead.

If study is to be part of a happy life, it must somehow harmonize with ethical action.

WHAT IS PROPER TO A PERSON?

It would, as Aristotle says, be “absurd” if a human being were to choose the life of something else instead of his own.⁵² If this is so, we ought not to attempt to choose the life of the gods; we ought to choose instead the life of a human being.

This is not to say that we ought not to choose the life in accord with understanding. Understanding, Aristotle tells us, is our “controlling and better element,” and what each of us “seems to be.”⁵³ But we are not the gods. We are human beings. And therefore, if we are not to choose the life of something else instead of our own, we ought to choose the life in accord with *human* understanding. The gods, who do not do acts of justice or of courage,⁵⁴ may have understanding that does not extend to prudence. Our understanding, if we are good, does, and indeed it is insofar as it does, that, if we practice the ethical virtues, it is our controlling element.

As I have already shown, understanding—*human* understanding, I will now emphasize—is involved in both study and the ethical virtues. Since it is this human understanding that is what we seem most of all to be, it is this human understanding that we ought to cultivate and in accord

⁵¹ EN 1166b7-8.

⁵² EN 1178a4-5.

⁵³ EN 1178a3-4.

⁵⁴ EN 1178b9-24.

with which we ought to live. And that means engaging in study, as Book X says, and in virtuous action, as Book IX says those who love themselves will do.

Here again the contrast between Aristotle and his teacher is interesting. It is Plato, not Aristotle, who tells us to strive to free our souls from excessive involvement with our bodies.⁵⁵ Aristotle takes the soul—or most of it⁵⁶—to be the “first actuality of a natural body which has life potentially.”⁵⁷ Action in the physical world is perfectly appropriate to such a soul, including the part of it that has understanding. Neglect of the activity peculiar to understanding—study—does not seem appropriate, however. The truly human life will involve both study and action.

INTELLECTUAL TEMPERANCE

Aristotle holds that virtue is a mean.⁵⁸ Temperance, for example, does not mean abstaining from all bodily pleasures and lacking interest in them altogether, it means not indulging in them to excess or finding too much pleasure in them. Indeed, a person who abstains completely and does not at all enjoy the bodily pleasures is insensible, which is also a vice.⁵⁹

I propose to add to the list of virtues *intellectual temperance*. As temperance tells us how much to indulge in the pleasures of food, drink and sex, intellectual temperance, I suggest, tells us how much to indulge in the pleasures of study. As corresponding vices, I propose *hyperreflectiveness*, for the person who engages in too much study to the detriment of the ethical virtues, and *unthinkingness*, for the person who does not study enough.

⁵⁵ *E.g. Phd.* 114b-e.

⁵⁶ See *DA* III.5.

⁵⁷ *DA* 412a27 (Hamlyn trans.).

⁵⁸ *EN* 1106a25-b29.

⁵⁹ *EN* 1118b9-19a21.

Like the other virtues, intellectual temperance prescribes a mean relative to the agent.⁶⁰ As the same amount of food may be too little for a star athlete and too much for a beginner,⁶¹ the same amount of study may be too much for one person and too little for another. Indeed, the attention it is appropriate to pay to study will vary according to a variety of factors, such as the condition of one's body, family, friends, possessions and country: If one of these is ailing, it will make a greater claim on one's time and effort than if it is not. Thus the same amount of study may be too little for a given person on a typical weekend and too much when his friends need his assistance. But in any event, each of them will make some claim, and the intellectually temperate person will turn away from study to take care of these matters to the degree the correct reason prescribes.

It is the life in accord with intellectual temperance, I propose, that is completely happy. Such a life resolves the problems I have raised:

The life of intellectual temperance is achievable, with no more (and perhaps no less) difficulty than that of the other ethical virtues. Certainly finding the mean in allocating one's time will be difficult, but so is practicing justice. Unlike the life devoted exclusively to study, which is for the gods alone, the life of intellectual temperance is in principle consonant with the requirements of human nature: This virtue ensures that we study, but it also ensures that we take care of ourselves and engage in the actions that accord with the rest of virtue.

The life of intellectual temperance is a life in accord with understanding. Since the intellectually temperate person divides his time as the correct reason prescribes, and the "correct reason" here as with the other ethical virtues is prudence, the exercise of intellectual temperance,

⁶⁰ See *EN* 1107a1-3.

⁶¹ Aristotle uses just this analogy at *EN* 1106b4.

as such, is in accord with understanding in the same way that the exercise of any other ethical virtue is. Moreover, when he studies, the intellectually temperate person is using the understanding of both parts of the soul that have reason: The part of the soul that has prudence decides that, at this particular time, he will study, and the part of the soul that has wisdom actually studies.

Recognizing intellectual temperance as a virtue means recognizing that it is not always virtuous to study; it is virtuous to study only at the time the correct reason prescribes. Then the person who turns away from study when the correct reason prescribes is not abandoning the activity of a greater virtue for that of a lesser one, but rather doing the act in accordance with intellectual temperance. An intellectually temperate person does not desire to study to excess, just as the temperate person does not desire to eat to excess. He is not pained at turning away from excess study in order to engage in ethical action any more than the temperate person is pained at rejecting excess food. Nor is he pained at withdrawing for a while from the sphere of action in order to return to study any more than the temperate person is pained at sitting down to dinner. He is not at odds with himself over whether to study or engage in ethical action.

The understanding at work in the intellectually temperate person is distinctly human. The lower animals, of course, do not have understanding at all; they do not engage in virtuous conduct or in study. The gods do not engage in virtuous conduct. The intellectually temperate person engages in both, and he divides his time as his understanding prescribes.

This, then, is not merely a life in accord with understanding, but a life in accord with *human* understanding. It is complete in a way neither the life of study nor the life in accord with

only the other virtues is, since it includes both; this suggests that it is the truly happy life, because “nothing incomplete is proper to happiness.”⁶²

I repeat a quotation I used earlier:

Moreover, each person seems to be his understanding, if he is his controlling and better element. It would be absurd, then, if he were to choose not his own life, but something else's. For what is proper to each thing's nature is supremely best and most pleasant for it; and hence for a human being the life in accord with understanding will be supremely best and most pleasant, if understanding, more than anything else, is the human being. This life, then, will also be happiest.⁶³

The controlling element of a person is his understanding, but it is *controlling* insofar as it directs his action. The intellectually temperate person's action is controlled by his understanding and engages it in respect both of the things whose principles do and of the things whose principles do not admit of being otherwise. His life is not that of the gods, nor is it that of the lower animals; it is distinctly human.

At the same time, if study and not virtuous action is divine, there will be a divine element to this life, because it will include study.

Someone might object that I have placed an inferior part of the soul, that whose virtue is prudence, in charge of a superior one, that whose virtue is wisdom.⁶⁴ Aristotle denies that prudence controls “wisdom or the better part of the soul.”⁶⁵ My answer is that Aristotle also tells us that political science does not rule the gods, even though it “prescribes about everything in the city”⁶⁶—including, no doubt, the festivals in honor of the gods. Intellectual temperance does not prescribe the content of wisdom. It merely prescribes when we ought to give wisdom our attention,

⁶² EN 1177b27.

⁶³ EN 1178a3-8.

⁶⁴ See EN 1145a8.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ EN 1145a13.

and when we ought to turn our attention to the other things that, along with study, comprise a complete human life.